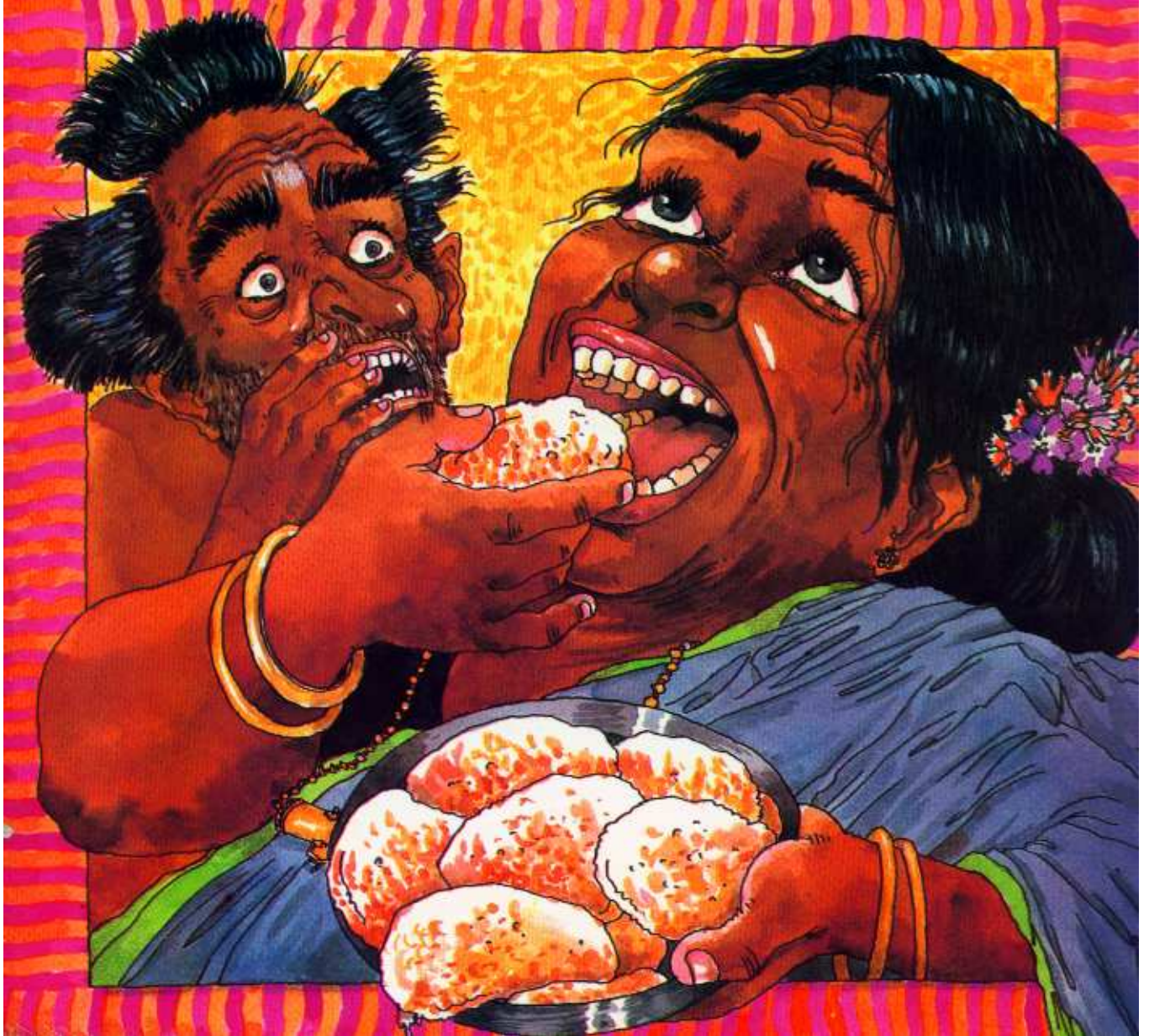
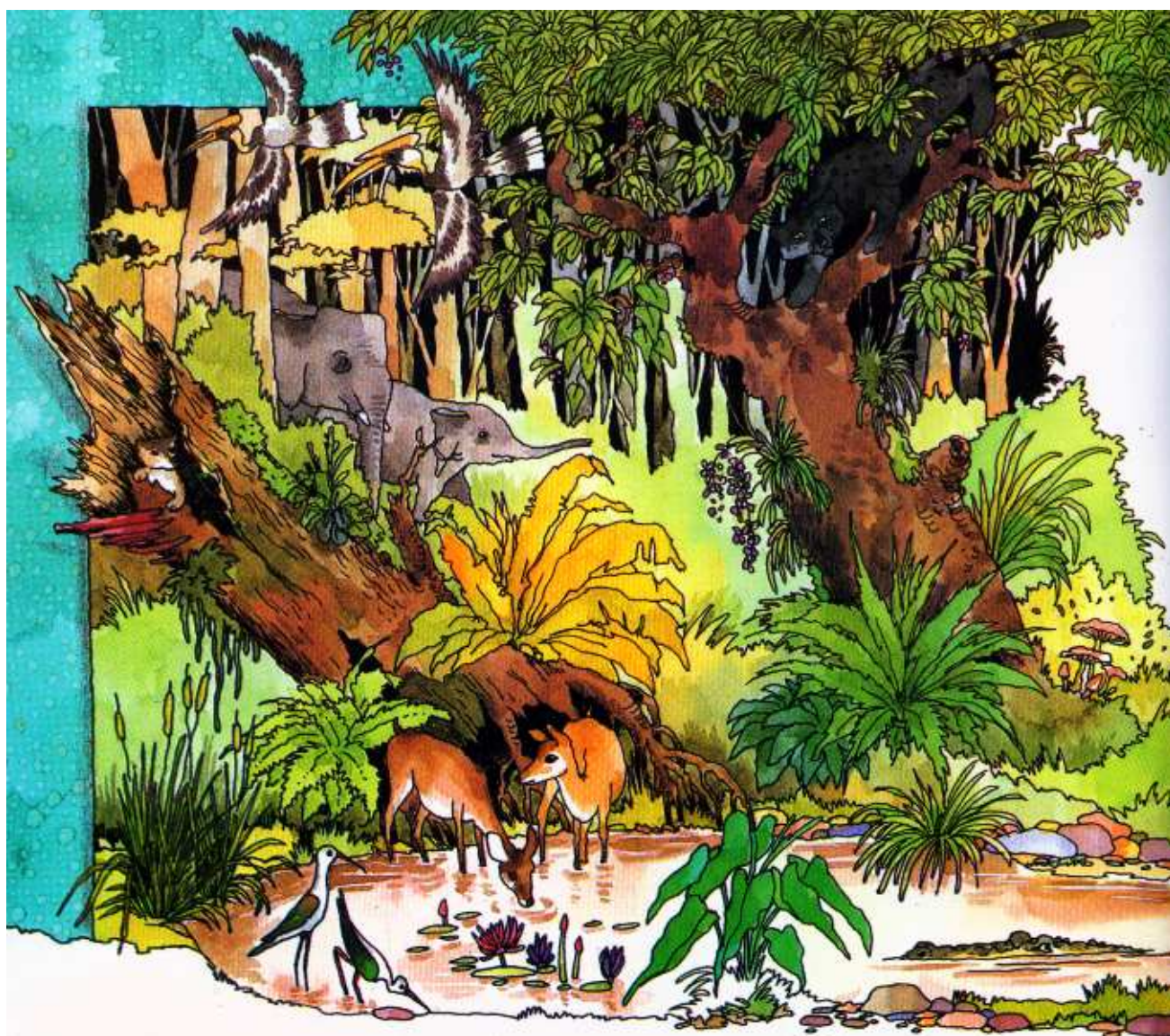


ALAMELU'S APPETITE

Jaya Paramasivan

Illustrator
Atanu Roy





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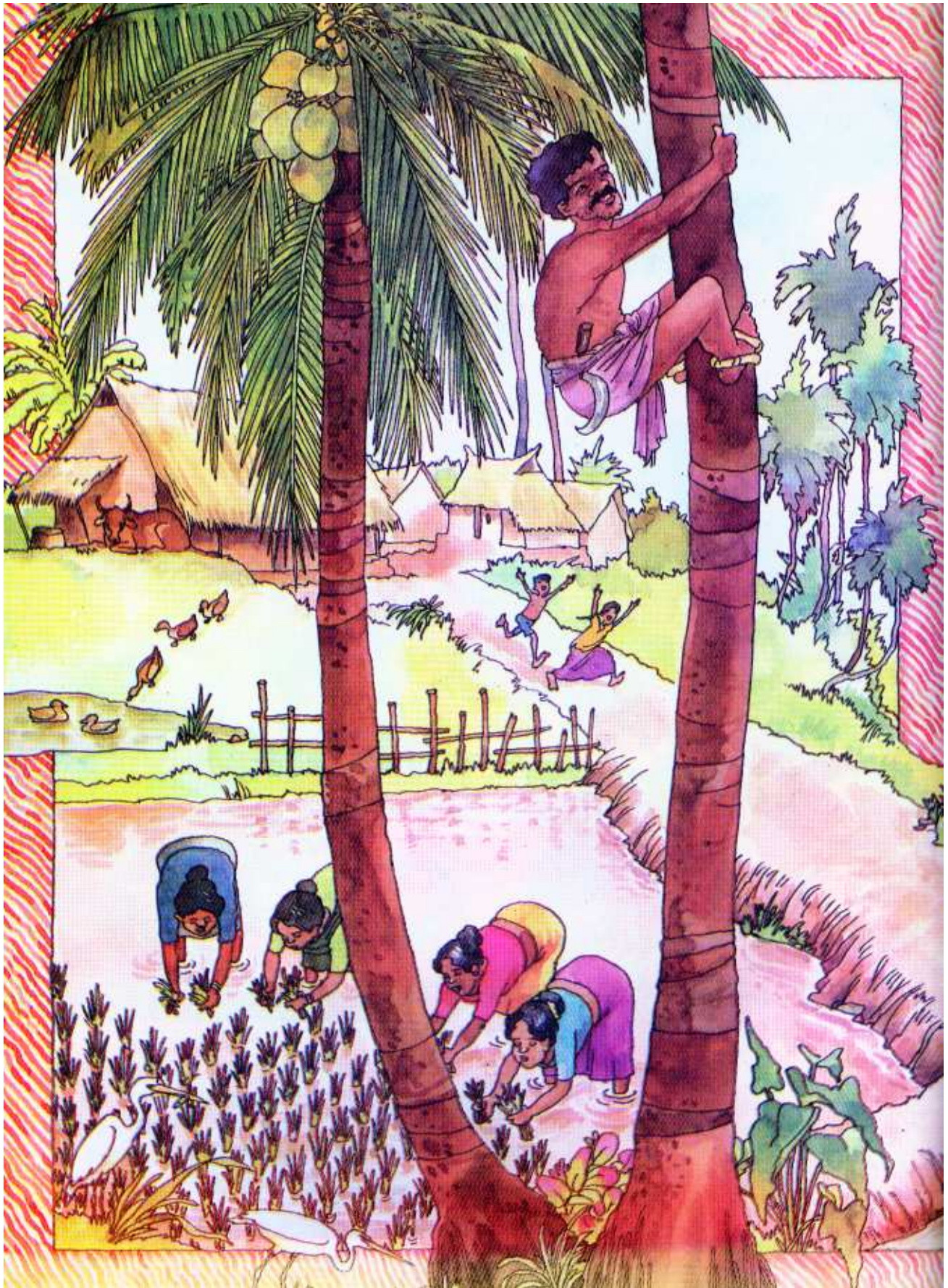
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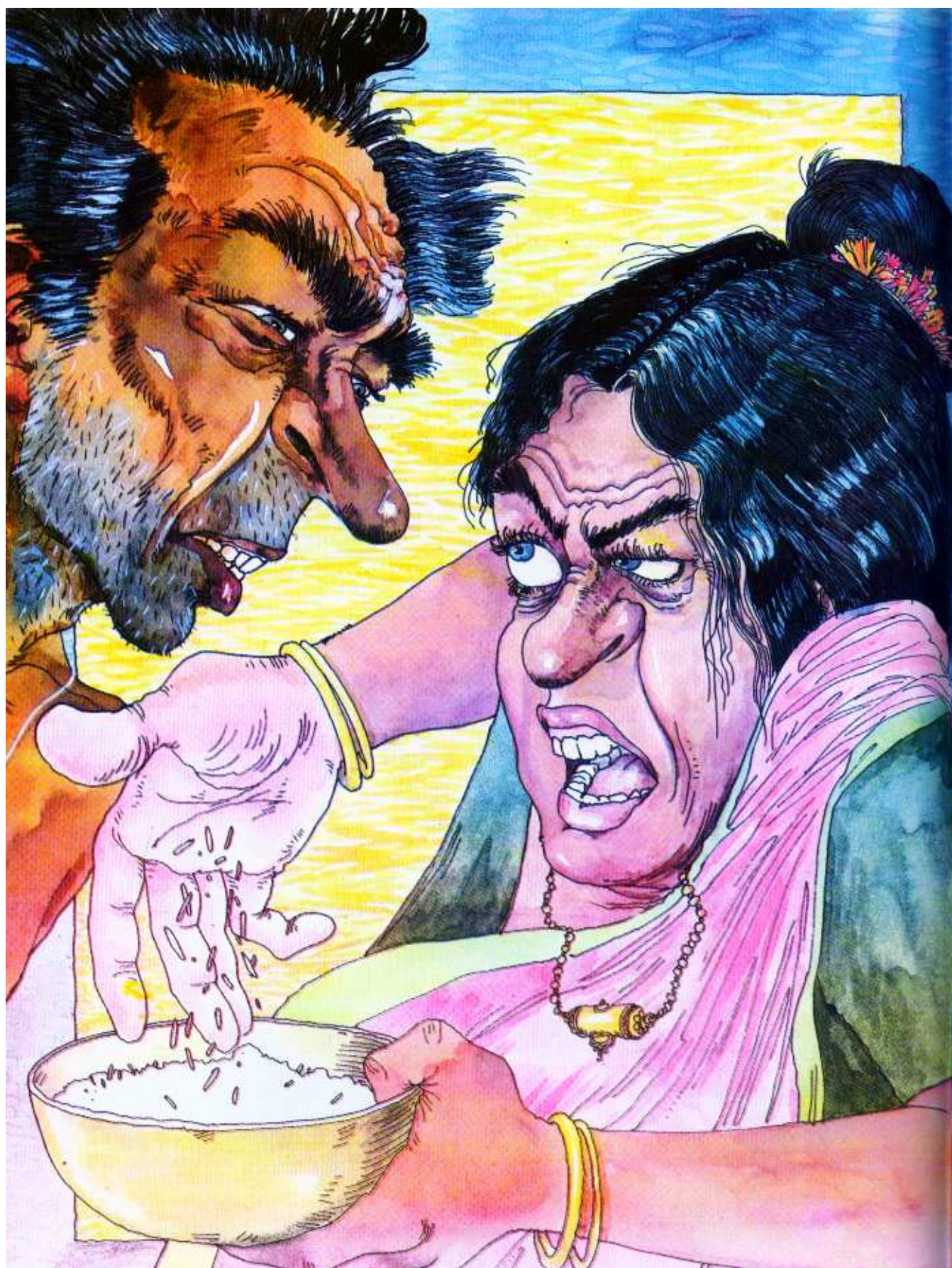


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In a remote village in South India there lived a poor village priest called Dasar with his wife Alamelu. Every day early in the morning he used to go out to the village carrying a copper pot in his hand and a bag slung on his shoulder. He sang hymns in praise of God and collected the alms doled out to him in the copper pot. By noon he used to return home and whatever he got for the day was enough for the two of them to eat and survive.





Alamelu was a good wife but over the years she grew dissatisfied with her dreary existence and yearned for a better life.

"How long can we keep on eating these rice grains handed out to us," she whined everyday, "why don't you ask for something else instead? Then we could have a change in our daily diet."

"How can I demand for something of my liking dear?" Dasar used to pacify her, "it is not proper to demand anything for singing the praise of God. It is Almighty's grace that we get atleast this much—"

"Oh, stop it!" Alamelu used to cut in and go on nagging Dasar till he would quietly slip out of his house head bowed down in sadness.



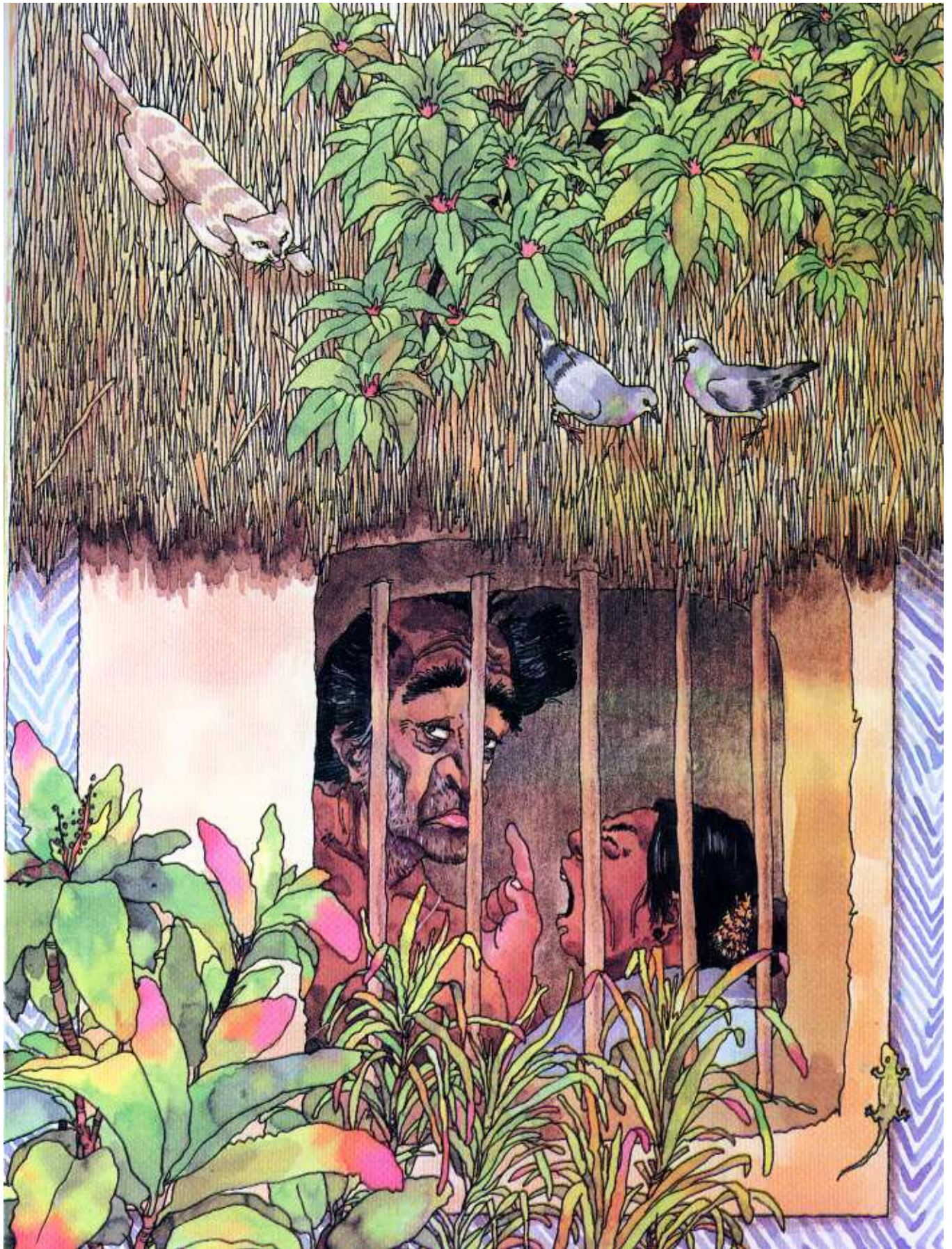
This went on day after day and one day Alamelu's berating was harsher than usual.

"You are so stupid as to be content with only this potful of grains," she complained shrilly. "Look at our neighbour! Today she had made some delectable rice pancakes and she gave me one to taste when I had been there in the morning. How can I describe the taste! Oooh! How I wish I could make them at home too! But," she turned to her husband and said naggingly, "You will never bring me that extra rice to make them! Oh! It is my fate!"

Dasar listened to her laments patiently and sighing resignedly said, "Very well, dear, tell me now what should I do, I will try to bring what you want."

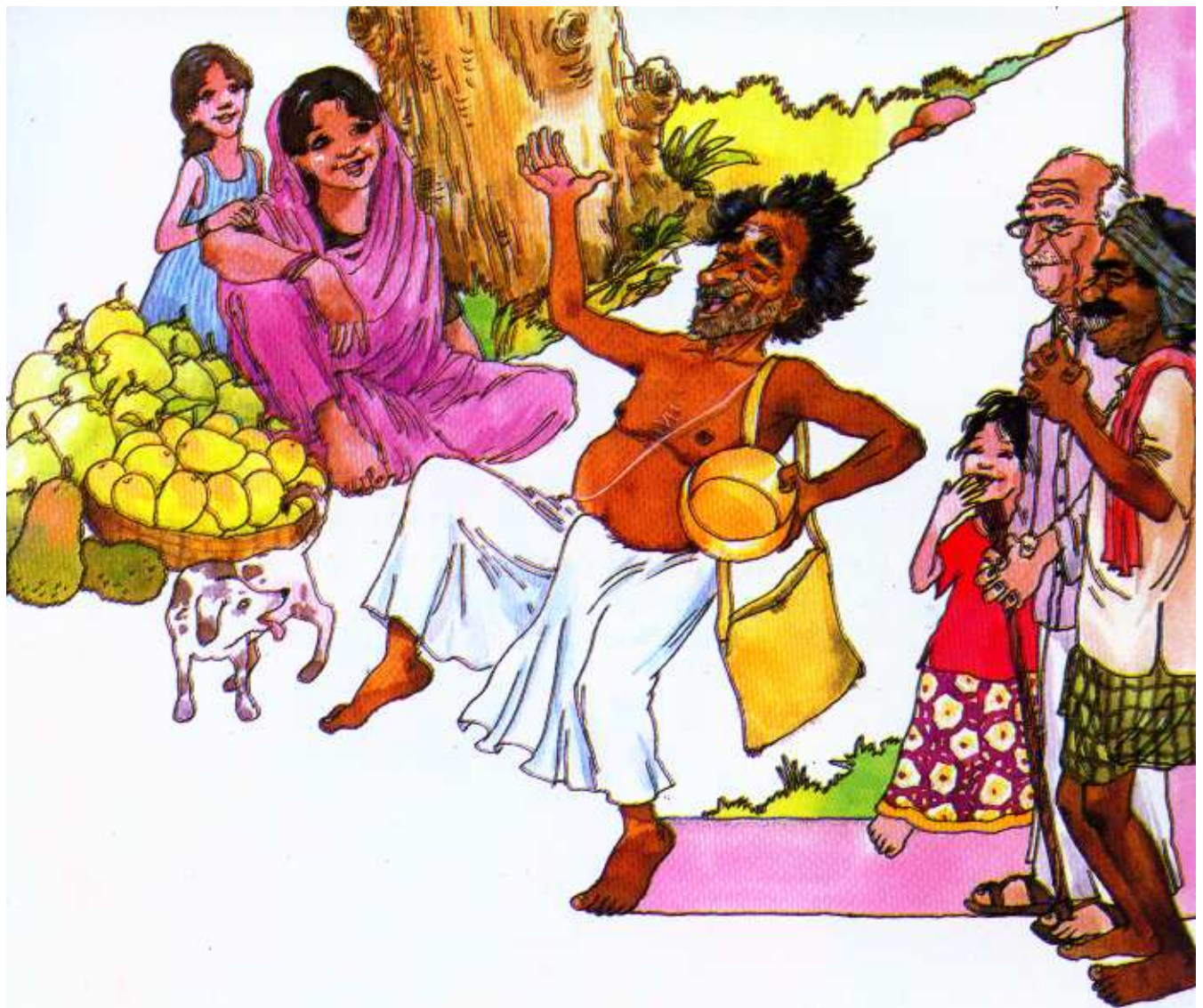
"Collect a little more than the usual rice grains tomorrow" she said thrusting a bag at him, "and bring a little jaggery too, so that I can prepare the pancakes."





Dasar started early the next morning for his daily rounds of the village. He slung the bag over his shoulders and carrying the copper pot in his hands started to sing the Glory of God in a sweet melodious voice. He was soon lost in the fervour of the hymns and forgot his promise to collect extra rice and jaggery. His songs were so inspiring that people around him joined in the singing. Swaying to and fro they sang joyously as Dasar sang on in ecstasy.





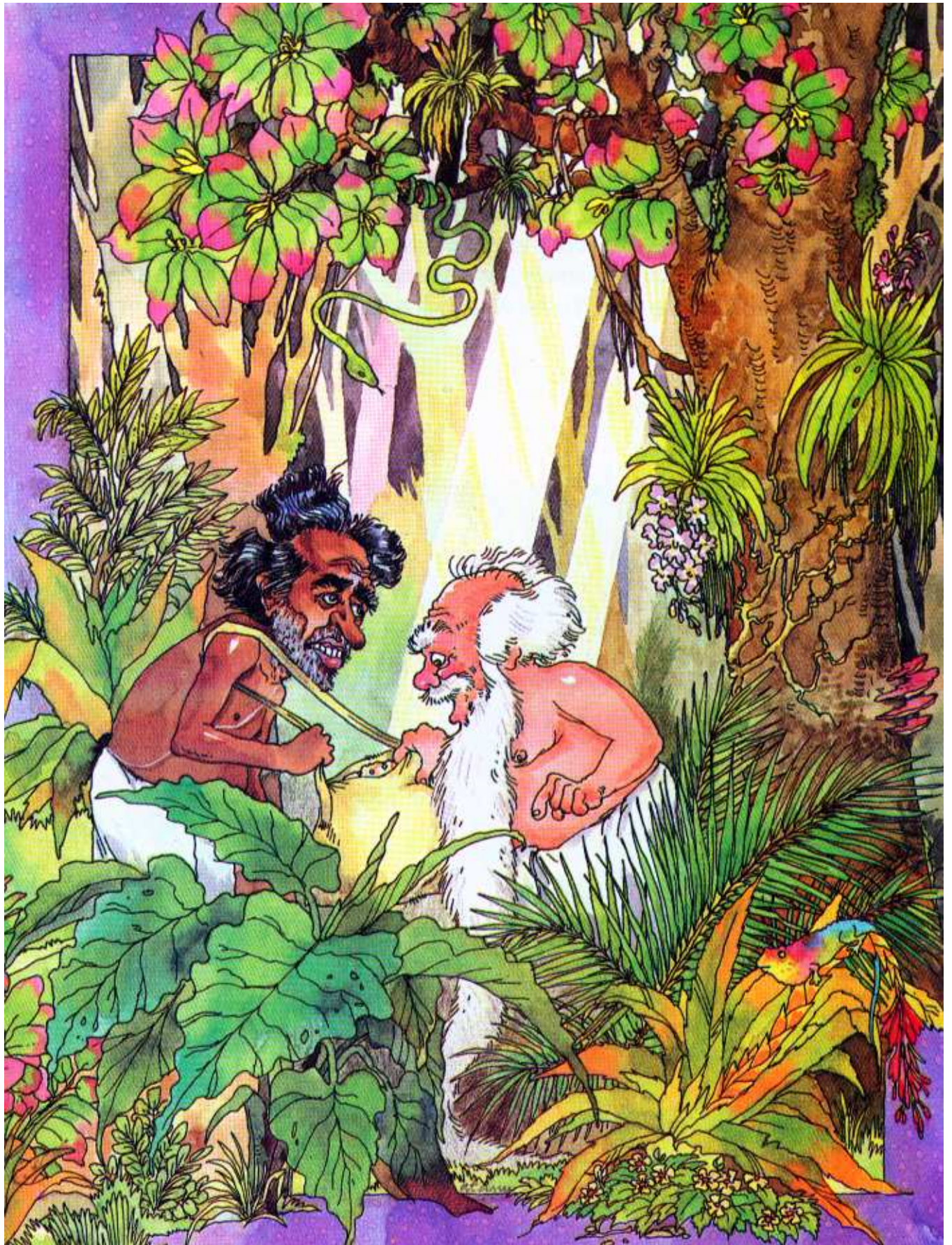
Hours passed. Suddenly Dasar became aware that the crowd around him had thinned out as people went back to their chores. Dasar remembering his word to his wife looked down at the copper pot and found that it was not quite full and there was no jaggery either for the pancakes. Disheartened he tottered tiredly along the wooded path leading to the next village, hoping to collect more rice and jaggery.

The forest was peaceful and cool as Dasar walked on deeply immersed in thoughts. Suddenly an old man crossed his path and stopped to hail him cheerfully. "Ho, there! Why are you not returning home after your usual rounds?"

Dasar looked up at the beaming face and said sadly, "what can I say friend, my wife will be livid if she finds that I have not brought her even a fistful of extra rice and jaggery to make the sweet rice pancakes she is planning to prepare." Then he proceeded to tell his problems to the sympathetic old man.

"I am a poor man. I do not complain about the alms I get daily. But my wife is not satisfied and craves for delicacies. "Oh", sighed Dasar heavily, "Is it God's will that I cannot take home what she had asked me for?"





"Why!" exclaimed the old man coming closer and touching the bag hanging on Dasar's shoulders. "I can see that you do have enough rice and jaggery here to make the pancakes. Go home, and give your wife what she had wished for." The old man laughed and walked away into the forest as Dasar stared in disbelief into the bag. There was indeed a lot of rice and jaggery in it.



Dasar looked up quickly to thank the old man but he had disappeared into the thick forest. Dasar felt thrilled and was convinced that the dear Lord whom he worshipped had come in person to help him. He excitedly went home and giving the bag to Alamelu told her all about the old man.



"Oh," she exclaimed happily as she peered into the bag, "It is so good of the old man to help you with these things. Go and finish your bath quickly while I make the pancakes."

Soon the pancakes were ready and they both sat down to eat. Alamelu at once started to gobble up the pancakes in her plate without even mumbling a prayer to the Lord thanking Him for His kindness. Dasar, however, quietly offered his prayers before partaking the pancakes. Alamelu licked the plate clean with a satisfied sigh. She wished she had many more of them left so that she could eat on endlessly for days together.

Days passed. Alamelu again started to yearn for pancakes. She began to pester Dasar again daily.







"I wish you could get me plenty of rice and jaggery again" she grumbled as Dasar set out one morning. "I wish the old man would give rice and jaggery generously so that I can eat pancakes to my hearts content."

Dasar tried to curb her greediness by saying that she should be content with the kindness shown by God. "Be thankful that we were able to taste such a delicacy by his Grace. How can I ask Him for a greater quantity?"

But Alamelu only glared at him and grew more and more insistent.

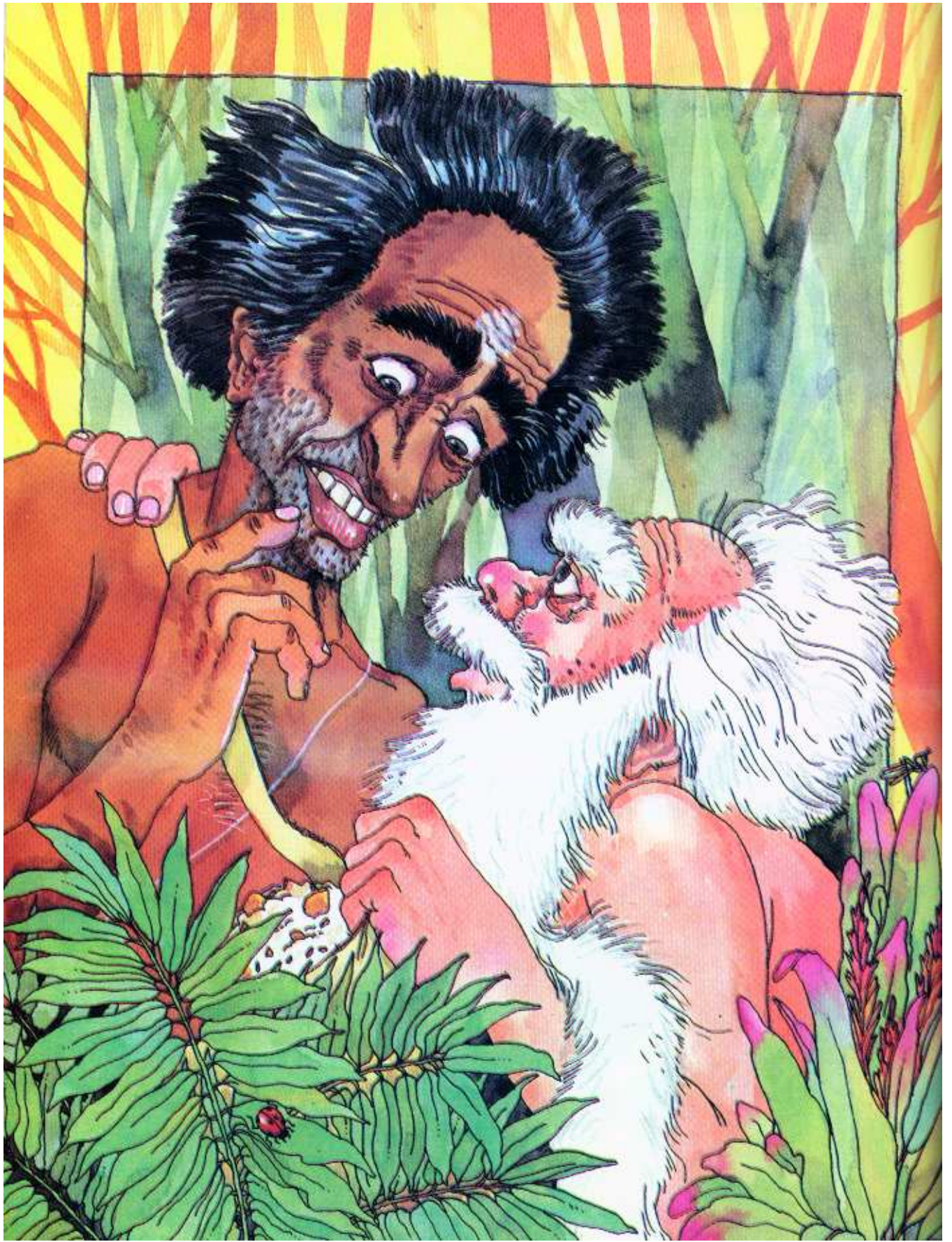
"Go and seek the old man again and ask him to give you twice of what he provided last time. I will make many more pancakes for us to eat. Go! Go, and find him."

Dasar grew weary of her nagging and set out on the forest path towards the next village, hoping to meet the old man there. His mind was so full of tormenting thoughts of his wife's discontentment that he failed to see the old man walking towards him till he almost collided with him.

"Oh, there you are friend," said the old man jovially as he stopped to look at Dasar. "How did your wife enjoy the sweet pancakes?"

Dasar stopped in surprise and folding his hands in reverence said humbly, "I am truly blessed by you, dear Sir, and I am convinced that you are the messenger of the merciful Lord come to grace us with your kindness," Dasar bowed his head contritely and added, "I am ashamed to ask you again Sir, but my wife had insisted on my seeking you out to ask for double the quantity of what you provided us last time so that she could eat those sweet pancakes to her heart's content." Dasar bowed his head lower in deep embarrassment.





The old man laughed merrily and said, "Oh, she did, did she? But why are you feeling shy to ask me?" The old man put his arms across Dasar's shoulders tenderly and touched the bag hanging there and said, "You are a good man. You shall certainly carry the ingredients again, dear friend. Give them to your wife to prepare the sweets."

Dasar looked up in surprise when suddenly he felt the bag becoming heavier. He realised that it was almost full of rice and jaggery. He turned to thank the old man but he had already walked away laughing merrily.

Dasar returned home and gave the bag to Alamelu, who pounced on it eagerly and set about making the sweet. She sat on the floor to empty the bag of rice on the ground. "Go, and have your bath quickly," she ordered Dasar curtly, "In the meantime I will prepare the pancakes."





As Dasar went out for his bath, Alamelu emptied the contents from the bag to get them measured and cleaned. But the flow of rice and jaggery from the bag never seemed to stop. Everytime she emptied the bag upside down more rice and jaggery seemed to fill it.

In the end, impatient Alamelu took the rice on the ground to get it soaked and pounded. But she was amazed to find that everytime she removed the soaked rice from the colander more seemed to appear in it! The same thing happened in the mortar too. The more rice she pounded and lifted from the mortar fresh rice seemed to fill it!

Tired but eager to get on with her preparations she quickly mixed the jaggery and made the dough for the pancakes and started to fry them in the oil smoking over the fire. If she removed the ones ready from the oil at once another lot was found floating in it! The exercise seemed endless and Alamelu in frustration let them be and took the fried ones in a plate and started to eat them.

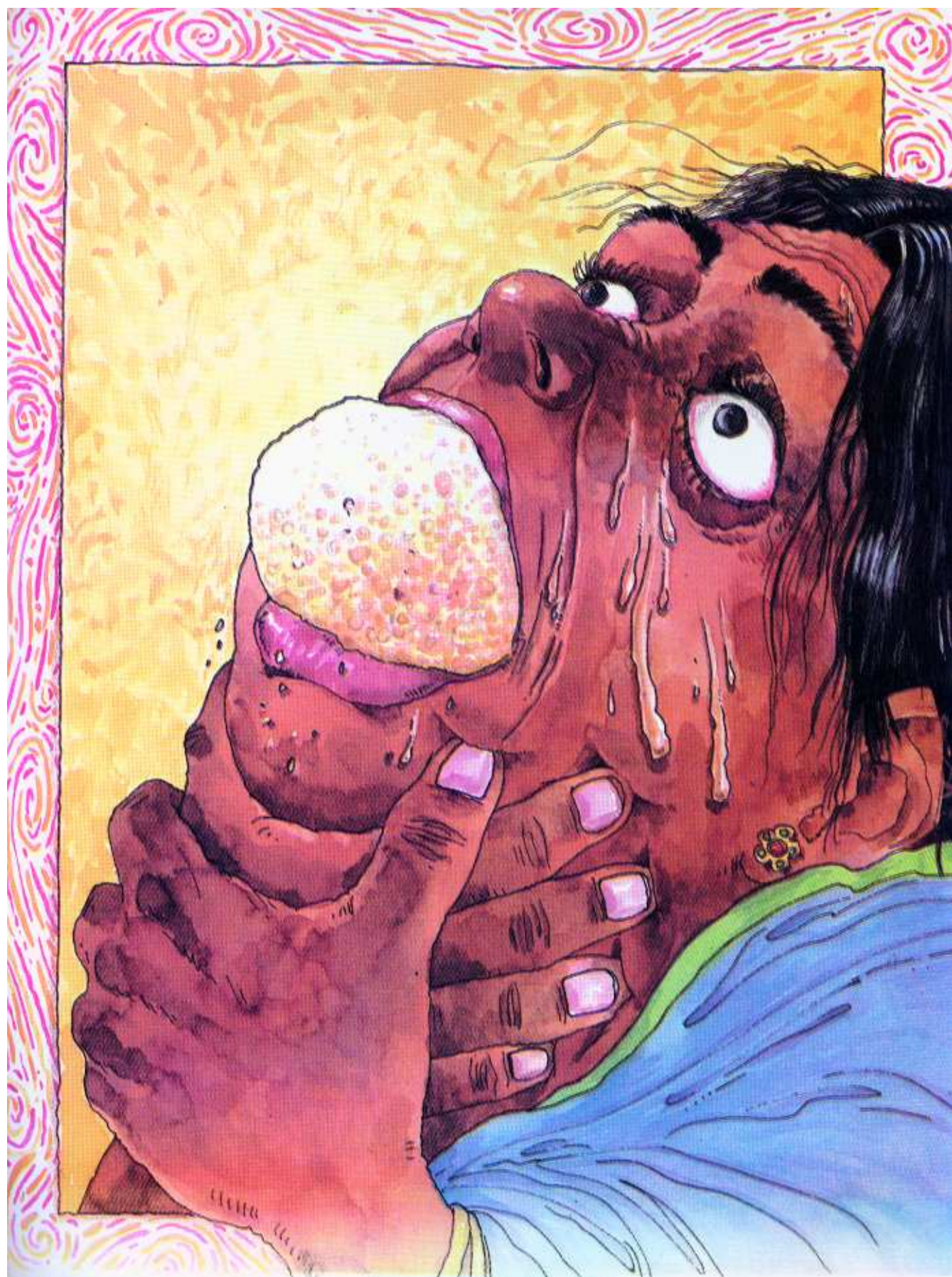


She bit a piece and started to chew it with great relish. Closing her eyes in pleasure she chewed the pancake and tried to swallow it. But as she chewed the sweet it seemed to grow again in her mouth. There started a never ending struggle to chew and swallow the sweet. Her eyes snapped open in astonishment and terror when she found that try hard as she could still she could not succeed in swallowing the sweet as it seemed to grow back in size as fast as she chewed it.

"MMPH—MMPPHH—MMPPHH!!" she gasped as she struggled to breathe and speak.

Just then Dasar entered the room and seeing the plight of Alamelu looked around the room and quickly guessed the situation. Alamelu her eyes popping out in terror and agonised with the strain of chewing the ever growing sweet in her mouth, fell at Dasar's feet and started to cry.







At once she was able to swallow the sweet and gasping in agony she cried, "Forgive me, dear husband! The Divine Hand has taught me a lesson for being ungrateful and greedy! Oh! Forgive me!"

Dasar recognised the hand of the old man behind the whole incident and smiling sympathetically at Alamelu lifted her to her feet.

The unlimited flow of rice jaggery and pancakes stopped and both Dasar and Alamelu enjoyed a hearty meal of the pancakes after thanking the Lord for his kindness.

They led a contented life thereafter secure with the knowledge that the Lord would always provide enough for his devotees.





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